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Hamas: talk to them

The trend of events in Gaza in the first months of 2008 has highlighted once again that the current situation is untenable. From Hamas's bulldozing the border-fence with Egypt to enable Gazans to [break out](#) [1] of their international blockade and stock up on food and energy essentials, to the rocket-attacks on Israeli towns and Israel's punitive military incursions, it is clear that something has to give. The question is: what?

In this article, I will argue that the present policy of Israel and its western allies of dealing exclusively with Fatah in the West Bank, isolating Hamas and weakening it by making its fiefdom, Gaza, economically unviable, is both counterproductive and dangerous. Instead, I will argue for engaging Hamas and ending Gaza's [isolation](#) [2]. Beyond the policy's grave humanitarian costs and its long-term effect on the unity of the Palestinian territories, there are three compelling reasons for engagement:

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* an analysis of Hamas's past behaviour suggests that, rather than being a "total spoiler", incapable of compromise, Hamas is capable of (some level of) compromise - if the political conditions are right. Permanent exclusion, conversely, reduces Hamas's incentives to compromise, and strengthens its more militant members, while driving the movement as a whole further into the arms of hardliners in Iran and Syria

* [Hamas](#) [6], its violent actions notwithstanding, represents a series of grievances that a significant portion of Palestinians hold and that need to be addressed for a future settlement to be stable

* the exclusion of Hamas from the political process is likely to undermine any agreement, since [Fatah's](#) [7] leadership lacks the popular legitimacy needed to implement it.

The current of compromise

There are various examples of Hamas compromising its long-term goal of liberating all of historic Palestine in return for domestic political gains - most prominent among them, its 2003 and 2005 ceasefire declarations, and its decision to participate in the January 2006 [legislative election](#) [8] (despite this being held in the context of an eventual two-state solution). These instances can be explained by the fact that Hamas has multiple goals and constituencies, some of which are not served by continued violence.

Hamas does not operate in a vacuum. It is a socially and politically embedded organisation which derives much of its power from popular support. Although ideologically it may remain opposed to recognising Israel, pragmatically it has to weigh up the costs of intransigence if [popular opinion](#) [9] does not support it. Two-thirds of the Palestinian population currently support a two-state solution.

Hamas's 2003 and 2005 ceasefire declarations are particularly illustrative, as they occurred at a time when the peace process was being given a new lease of life. If Hamas were indeed a total spoiler, it would have acted to scupper any progress. That it did not is significant; equally so is that its decisions appear to have been influenced by the prospect of greater political inclusion and a shift in popular opinion towards a ceasefire.

Other factors played a role, from relative "military" weakness as a result of Israeli policies to a (temporal) weakening of the hardline elements in two of Hamas's main state sponsors, Syria and Iran. But both ceasefire declarations occurred against the backdrop of intense negotiations with Fatah about ways to increase (and formalise) power-sharing, and a marked shift in popular support



towards a ceasefire - coupled, in 2005, with a dramatic drop in support for suicidebombing to below 50% (for the first time since the outbreak of the [al-Aqsa intifada](#) [10] in September 2000).

In both instances, Hamas leaders were observed consulting people about how people would react to the [movement](#) [11] declaring a ceasefire or refraining from doing so - suggesting that popular opinion mattered to them. Hamas has a long record of concern for public opinion - although this has not stopped it from pursuing unpopular policies (e.g. its violent opposition to the peace process during the [1990s](#) [12]). Internally, each major policy decision was preceded with a grassroots consultation. However, heeding the views of the public was made more imperative by the possibility of increasing power through electoral contests.

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Volker Perthes, "[Beyond peace: Israel, the Arab world, and Europe](#) [27]" (22 January 2008)

John Strawson, Rosemary Bechler, "[Palestine: the pursuit of justice](#) [28]" (28 January 2008)

Eyad Sarraj, "'[Gaza is quite a dynamic place now](#) [1]'" (29 January 2008)

Yossi Alpher, "[Gaza's agency, Israel's choice](#) [29]" (29 January 2008)

Geoffrey Bindman, "[Gaza: unlock this prison](#) [30]" (7 March 2008)

Hamas has participated in elections since its [inception](#) [31]. However, these concerned the largely symbolic student and professional union elections that served as political barometers in the absence of municipal and national elections. When the long-term Fatah leader Yasser Arafat called legislative elections in 1996 - the first in the occupied territories' [history](#) [32] - Hamas, after much debate, boycotted them on the grounds that participation would legitimise the Oslo peace process without increasing Hamas's power (faith in the impartiality of the system was low, while support for Hamas was less than it would be in 2006).



By 2003, and even more so by 2005, the prospect of power-sharing was much more credible. The 2002-03 negotiations centred on how to include Hamas in the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which continues to play an important political role. In 2005, municipal elections, suspended for more than two decades, had been called and Hamas had already won a third of available seats in the first round, while legislative elections were expected to be declared shortly. Arafat had [died](#) [33] in November 2004. Fatah had been weakened by infighting and Israeli punitive measures. And, for the first time, polls suggested support for Hamas equalled support for Fatah.

Under these conditions, compromise on continued resistance appeared promising, giving the pragmatists within Hamas a convincing argument to persuade the hardliners to try political inclusion. Hamas, at least according to what negotiators involved in the talks and what Hamas leaders themselves have said, was well aware that political inclusion would limit its resistance options. That it nevertheless opted for this path is therefore meaningful.

Some have argued that this was purely a tactical move to rearm Hamas, or that Hamas was too weak to continue fighting. That Hamas has used the ceasefire to strengthen itself is beyond doubt. But if that were its sole goal, it could have simply scaled back attacks, without the "humiliation" of a (unilateral) ceasefire. The fact that it took ten months of negotiations to agree to the [2003 ceasefire](#) [34] (even though Israel continued to target its militants that year), and that Hamas was ready to declare a second ceasefire in 2005 (and maintained it until June 2006, despite continued attacks by Israel) suggests that more was at stake.

Neither can military weakness have been the sole reason, although it played a part. Hamas sustained its attacks on Israeli soldiers and citizens prior to both ceasefires (although its capacity to mount suicide attacks was severely weakened in 2004), while Israel continued to perpetrate "targeted" assassinations during both ceasefires, thus rendering a ceasefire less attractive from a purely military point of view.

Hamas's ceasefire declarations thus appear to have been driven in part by the prospect of greater political inclusion and by a shift in popular opinion towards a ceasefire, both of which made continued resistance more costly. This indicates both that Hamas is capable of compromise, and that its decisions can be [influenced](#) [35] by changing the cost-benefit calculus of its various options. It also confirms that there is a constituency within Hamas which considers compromise on one core goal (liberating all of Palestine) acceptable if this means Hamas is in a better position to fulfil its other core goals of making Palestinian society more Islamic, increasing social justice and eradicating corruption.

Pragmatists vs hardliners

The existence of such a constituency can be gleaned from the furious and lengthy debates that preceded the ceasefires, as well as from the actions of those who are publicly associated with this constituency. But it can also be surmised from the fact that Hamas enjoys much support from the small-business class which typically favours pragmatic as opposed to revolutionary tactics (the same applies to a lesser extent to its refugee-camp constituency whose support for radical tactics is tampered by the imperatives of daily survival).

Those leaders who advocate pragmatic compromise are more often than not political leaders inside the [occupied territories](#) [36], rather than paramilitary leaders or members of Hamas's exiled leadership in Damascus. Their pragmatism is influenced by their proximity to their constituencies (although ideological objections to compromise and the radicalising effect of Israeli policies on the general population have enabled notable hawks to thrive inside the territories). The [exiled leadership](#) [37], by contrast, is far removed from their constituencies, rendering it more amenable to pressures from Syria and Iran (although there are some notable pragmatists in this group). The paramilitary leadership is less dependent on maintaining popularity and tends, for reasons including loyalty to fallen comrades and organisational survival, to be less willing to give up the [struggle](#) [38].

The pragmatists argue that, if popular support for resistance wanes, compromise on Israel is necessary to avoid political marginalisation. As long as the peace process is in crisis, and Israel responds heavy-handedly (e.g. killing 130 Palestinians in February-March 2008 in response to the



death of one Israeli), violence is likely to have (some) popular support. However, if a peace takes hold which leads to a viable economy and removes the many [obstacles](#) [39] to personal freedom Palestinians currently experience (roadblocks, curfews, border-closures, Israeli settlements), popular support for resistance is likely to dwindle. Because Hamas is deeply dependent on maintaining popular support, Hamas would risk marginalisation if it were to continue along a hawkish path, and so lose any opportunity to influence domestic Palestinian politics.

However, such an argument is only convincing to Hamas's hardliners if compromise on Israel leads to tangible political benefits. In 2005, the situation was that the pragmatists could convince the hardliners. By mid-2006, their argument was no longer convincing, as both Fatah and the international community had actively denied Hamas the fruits of their electoral victory. By then, there was little political benefit to be gained from restraint, whether *vis-à-vis* Fatah or *vis-à-vis* Israel. When Israel killed a particularly high number of Palestinian civilians in May 2006, there was little incentive to keep the ceasefire (in contrast to the countless earlier assassinations and incursions which had been met largely with restraint).

Such restraint briefly regained its attraction following Saudi Arabia's intervention in February 2007, leading to the ill-fated [national-unity](#) [40] government. But when that began to implode, the pragmatists' argument was further discredited. Hamas's ousting of Fatah from Gaza in June 2007 must be seen against this background, although other factors played a role (such as the frustration among pragmatists that they could not reinstate law and order while Fatah controlled the security forces and, allegedly, used them to scupper any such efforts).

But if the pragmatists' approach collapsed, it is not beyond resuscitation. Some reports of backroom negotiations between Hamas and Fatah - and even between Hamas and Israel - suggest that the pragmatists, including (*de facto*) prime minister [Ismail Haniya](#) [41], are still a force to be reckoned with. Similarly, there is still a constituency among Hamas's supporters which, under the right conditions, favour political compromise over continued resistance (one recent poll found 25% of those supporting the peace process favouring Hamas; 40% of those who voted for Hamas in 2006 supported the peace process while an earlier poll suggested that 60% of Hamas supporters supported a two-state solution).

However, for the pragmatists to regain the upper hand, both Fatah and the [international](#) [18] community, including Israel, must change their stance. This is not without risk. Israel is rightly concerned about negotiating with a party that formally seeks its eradication, and continues to target and kill its citizens. Fatah is rightly concerned about Hamas's [behaviour](#) [42] towards political dissent in Gaza since June 2007. Any engagement with Hamas must be accompanied with measures which take these concerns into account and curb Hamas's ability to use [violence](#) [43] outside the structures of state.

By the same token, though, Hamas is rightly concerned about negotiating with a party that has actively sought to remove it from legitimately gained power, and with a state that has repeatedly reneged on its promises, and continues to kill Palestinian civilians, even if primarily in a "collateral" way, and destroy their livelihoods in its pursuit of its definition of national security.

The cost of exclusion

The price of not accepting these risks, however, is accepting even greater risks. Because Hamas represents a significant constituency, its [concerns](#) [44] must be taken seriously. This is not about legitimising Hamas. Hamas *already* enjoys legitimacy on account of its representing a sizeable constituency and its victory in the 2006 election. Rather, to listen to Hamas' concerns is to take seriously the concerns of some 30-40% of the Palestinian population - and more, where its concerns overlap with those of the wider population.

Some of Hamas's demands cannot be considered. Israel, for instance, can never be expected to heed Hamas's demand for its eradication. But to ignore the more legitimate of the movement's concerns (from the point of view of international law and humanitarian concerns) is to perpetuate the instability of the current situation - just as Israel's ignoring Palestinian concerns about [settlement expansion](#) [45], military incursions, and the economic effects of border closures during the 1990s



contributed to the outbreak of the al-Aqsa *intifada* and the current impasse.

Some recent polls suggest that support for Hamas has increased, while support for Fatah has decreased. They suggest that Ismail Haniya's government in Gaza enjoys greater legitimacy than Fatah's government in the West Bank. This underscores that the policy of isolating Hamas is not working - but more, sidelining Hamas in such conditions is even more perilous, as it risks alienating large sections of the Palestinian population even further.

These figures also show that Fatah's leadership (leaving aside that it has no control over Gaza and its 1.4 million inhabitants) lacks the popular legitimacy to implement an unpopular peace agreement. Hamas currently enjoys the support of around a third of the overall population, and Fatah just over 40%. Many on both sides, but especially Hamas supporters, will oppose a peace agreement if it falls well short of a return to the [1967 borders](#) [46]- or if it excludes Gaza from the equation.

The more Hamas is sidelined, the less it will have to lose, the more it will be encouraged to become a total spoiler. Hamas has already shown it has the capacity to derail President Bush's peace plans, and so turn its isolation into an asset by becoming the champion of those who mistrust Bush's agenda. The movement's diplomatic isolation has also pushed it further towards Syria and Iran. This makes it even harder for the pragmatists to convince the hardliners of the benefits of restraint.

Meanwhile, lack of diplomatic movement increases the attraction of more militant splinter groups among Palestine's youth. In early 2008, popular support for armed attacks against Israeli civilians was registered at 67% (a rise from 40% in 2005), indicating a decline in the restraint that [public opinion](#) [47] had exercised. The longer the political system remains paralysed and the feuding between Hamas and Fatah continues, the more Hamas is likely to invest in its paramilitary wing (with the aid of Iran and Syria), making it less dependent on popular support.

In short, though engaging Hamas is risky, isolating Hamas is riskier. That Hamas has shown in the past to be capable of compromise in return for political benefits suggests that a policy of engagement has the potential to impose restraint. If Hamas throws itself behind a negotiated settlement, it greatly enhances the chance that it will be implemented - just as Hamas's 2005 ceasefire declaration led to a drop of two-thirds in the number of Israelis killed annually.

But for an initiative to work, Hamas must be given real political power to give the pragmatists leverage over the hardliners. At the same time, measures must be adopted to curb Hamas's ability to resort to unauthorised violence. To undermine the hardliners' argument, Israel must do all in its power - without compromising national security - to cease those practices that have in the past served to radicalise the Palestinian population, and provided hardliners with a justification for their militancy. As neither party is likely to adopt such a path voluntarily, the international community has a vital role to play to make compliance pay while making obstruction costly.

A failure to engage Hamas, conversely, will increase the attraction of a return to full-scale violence, and further erode Fatah's legitimacy through its close association with the west. Gaza will continue to [suffer](#) [30], making its inhabitants more dependent on Hamas, and isolating it further from the West Bank. The longer Hamas and Fatah are dominant in separate enclaves, without the cautionary effect of the prospect of future elections, the more they will become used to exercising power unopposed; the result will be an increase in human-rights abuses and greater reliance on coercive power. The chances of a (stable) negotiated settlement would also decrease, with potentially serious consequences for the entire region. A continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will fuel those advocating militancy, while the international community's refusal to accept the 2006 electoral outcome will further discredit the democratic route.

The choice, therefore, seems clear. All that is needed is the courage to take it.

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